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Poesía de la primera guerra mundial en forma de cómic: un análisis de Above the Dreamless Dead de Chris Duffy

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TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

Título

**Poetry of the Great War in comic form: an analysis of
Chris Duffy's *Above the Dreamless Dead***

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ABSTRACT

This essay delves into the main features of First World War poetry and the graphic novel in regard to Chris Duffy's *Above the Dreamless Dead*. This book originally adapts into the comic form poems by the so called 'Trench Poets,' who fought in the brutal European armed conflict between 1914 and 1918. The stunning artwork of a number of American and European cartoonists when translating iconic war poems into visual images and comic strips results in the creation of an emotive and unique book which drives war poetry to its limits.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo se exploran las principales características de la poesía de la primera guerra mundial y la novela gráfica en relación con *Above the Dreamless Dead* de Chris Duffy. Este libro incluye la original adaptación a cómic de poemas de los llamados 'poetas de trinchera', quienes lucharon en el cruel conflicto armado de Europa entre 1914 y 1918. El asombroso trabajo de varios dibujantes americanos y europeos al traducir los icónicos poemas de guerra a material gráfico y tiras cómicas da lugar a la creación de una obra emotiva y única que lleva la poesía de guerra a sus límites.

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“The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him.”

Virginia Woolf, *Diaries*, August 27, 1918.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the essay

One hundred years ago, as winter was fading away, the German imperial army launched the last significant offensive of the great European war. For the next months until the armistice of 1918 a few thousand soldiers were yet to meet their fallen brothers-in-arms in what turned out to be a meaningless war. Indeed, its only purpose was to demonstrate the hatred, unsensitivity and the darkest side of human soul, as well as the destructiveness resulted from the new machinery and technological advances which society had been proud of prior to 1914. What initially was thought to be a sort of a sprint war which was even cheered by the British in an atmosphere of celebration full of national pride, soon became a cruel and gruesome conflict in the form of the well-known trench warfare in which soldiers from both sides had to cope with both physical and mental fatigue due to constant shell bombardments and diseases caused by insalubrity, even more than fighting.

Of course, the effects of this dreadful reality echoed significantly in artistic fields such as music, painting, photography and literature, where dehumanisation of the individual was a main concern. An interesting example of this is the group of the so-called ‘trench poets’ formed by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and other contemporaries who wrote poetry about the war from a soldier’s perspective as they were serving at the French battlefield. The object of this essay is a unique book, *Above the Dreamless Dead*, which consists of a compilation of several iconic war poems by those writers mentioned before among others, which are ingenuously adapted by various cartoonists into comic strips. Overall, the aim of this paper is to analyse this original adaptation of the trench poets’ poems and the issues that might arise.

The first part of this essay is going to give light to some theoretical aspects concerning both poetics and the graphic novel genre since they are important to have into account in order to be able to understand fully the analysis of the book. Firstly, in the

point 2.1 there will be a discussion about the place of the trench poets within First World War poetry as a whole, because there were also authors who wrote about the war but did not take an active role in the conflict, that is, serving in the army. Also, it is going to deal with several ideas about poetry such as the reason why this genre is chosen in order to recall war memories since it is wrongly associated with beauty and tranquillity, and with other ideas for instance, the main characteristic themes and the aesthetics of this group of soldiers. After this, in point 2.2 it is going to take place some argumentation to the definition, issues and current state of the graphic novel. Here, aesthetic issues will be arisen in relation to the style of different prominent cartoonist like Art Spiegelman or Chester Brown, and also it will be exposed why this genre is linked to literature of trauma.

The second part is going to drive the matter to a closer analysis of *Above the Dreamless Dead*. Thus, in point 3.1 a description about its aesthetics is going to be provided, as well as some insight about the typology of the poems and matters about the reinterpretation performed in the poetic works by the cartoonists. Moreover, with the aim of going deeper with an example, in 3.2 Isaac Rosenberg's poem 'Dead Man's Dump' is going to be reviewed taking into account everything previously exposed in the chapter. Afterwards, since this book present a few characteristics in common with the graphic narrative, chapter 4 is going to give some argumentation to the question whether or not *Above the Dreamless Dead* is a graphic novel.

1.2. Methodology

In order to acquire enough knowledge to deal with every aspect in this essay, I have used several sources which are cited at the end of this paper. When researching about poetry during the Great War, I found very useful Edna Longley's essay 'The Great War, history, and the English lyric' and 'Interpreting the war' by James Campbell, included in Sherry's *The Literature of the First World War*, where they argue about the evolution of war poetry from 1914 to 1918 and the main aesthetic issues. Longley provides perceptions about the relationship between poetry and history, similarly to Campbell, who explains theoretical features about war poetry. Besides, the guide *Twentieth-Century War Poetry* by Philippa Lyon was also helpful in order to gather information about the themes of this type of poetry and the special characteristics that it presents when treating traumatic events such as the commemoration of war experiences. In the case of Ian Mackean's *The Essentials*

of *Literature in English post-1914*, it was used in order to provide a reliable contextualisation of the place of war poetry within the British and Irish literature of that time.

At the same time, I collected a lot of valuable information about the graphic novel in both Stephen Tabachnick's *Teaching the Graphic Novel* and Andrew Bourelle's 'Chapter 2' in Alissa Burger's *Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom*. Even though they are conceived with the aim of analysing the pros and cons of the use of graphic novels when teaching, they give many theoretical data about this literary genre, such as its definition and status in relation with the popular reception and other genres, or aesthetics. For instance, these theoretical aspects range from Tabachnick's explanation about the evolution of the graphic novel from its origins to Bourelle's clarification about the genre's terminology.

Moreover, various essays in Jan Baetens' *The Graphic Novel*, like Hein's, Reibman's or Vice's, were particularly useful when trying to deal with more specific issues and themes about the graphic novel, such as trauma representation and the handling of narrative time. Here, they are mainly making use of famous examples such as Spiegelman's *Maus* or Tardi's *It Was the War of the Trenches*, about the Second and First World Wars, respectively, which help to understand the concepts given about this genre.

2. POETICS AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

2.1. The paradigmatic case of Great War poetry and the ‘trench poets’

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, literature, and art panorama in general, was starting to show considerable changes. The turn of a century dominated by the British Empire and colonisation was then to bring both social and literary changes, mainly the absolute reaction and rupture towards the romantic philosophy and the way of thinking of the Victorian era. That is, modernism in an experimental form was rising, although it did not fully result until the outbreak of the First World War. According to Vincent Sherry (2003), liberalism as well as other features of poetry went on decaying after the cruel conflict, which “propelled a revolution against the major, precedent conventions of the previous centuries: a rationalism of language as well as attitude.” (21). In other words, this clearly supposed a break with the eminent romantic subjectivism in pursuit of a rationalistic language, then understood by rational men who had lost their faith in the nineteenth century idea of progress that was supposed to promise a better future.

Thus, it is in this literary context where the poetry of the Great War is set. As argued by both Ian Mackean and Philippa Lyon, war poetry has been during the nineteenth century until nowadays one of the most popular literary genres. Indeed, it is still being praised and admired by readers like us, citizens who have never been in contact with combat, but even so we get the main impressions of it. As a matter of fact, Lyon (2005) regards this type of poetry as special because it brings forth a curious relationship between literature, history and commemoration. In this sense, for example short poems are usually recited during principal national days and memorials of past wars in which England was involved. Last year for instance, in May 2017, after the deplorable terrorist attack in Manchester in which several innocent minors were killed, various demonstrations were organised and there some poems were also recited to remember the victims and their families.

At the same time, back in the beginning of the twentieth century and nowadays, there are other resources that allow the portrayal and recalling of these awful events such as photography or film. So, why poetry is that effective concerning this kind of matters? As James Campbell understands, its exceptional character lies in that “only lyric poetry captures the moment, not recollected in tranquillity, but experienced, as it were, just as

the poem is being written. Thus, lyric war poetry becomes synonymous with poetry written during the hostilities.” (2005: 264). Novels, letters or diaries from the soldiers also contain experiences about the war, but it is poetry which thrives when trying to convey emotions. Evidently, it is shorter than the other genres, so it is quicker to write and read. What is more, the symbology that poems suggest, contained in a few words, is stronger than any image, chapter or memoir ever written. Also, according to Edna Longley, poetry also “allows for improvisation and rapid response. [...] Poetry’s symbolic and mnemonic force reaches where prose cannot touch.” (2005: 60).

Before going deeper into the subject, it is important to remark that not all the poetry produced during the years of the war belonged to soldiers who met combat, the so-called ‘trench poets’; almost every poet wrote in some way war poetry. For instance, amongst the authors included in *Above the Dreamless Dead* such as Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy and Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, did not take an active role in the British military services even though they dedicated their efforts to write poems about the war. Curiously, a great amount of poetry about the Great War was indeed produced by writers who were not in uniform. In the words of Mackean, “more than half of the war poetry was thus produced by male civilians and a quarter by women” (2005: 246). Therefore, what is clear is that amongst the large body of work of this kind of poetry, through the years, literary criticism has focused on a small but powerful group of these poets, the ones that fought in the European battlefields and lived the experience first-hand, the ‘trench poets’.

2.1.1. Main themes and aesthetics

Despite of the fact that previously it has been mentioned Great War poetry to be placed in the context of the rise of modernism, the truth is that the trench poets’ production little had to do with the movement. In fact, the group of the soldier poets were not a group itself. It is factually that some of them, like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen met and shared ideas about poetry and war, but never with an intention of creating a movement. In Longley’s words, “War poetry, then, may be less a category than a multi-generic special case – even the quintessential case – of the encounter between form and history” (2005: 58).

In this sense, if they neither formed a literary group nor felt as part of literary modernism, what is the identity of these poets? Obviously, in general terms the ‘trench poets’ showed some literary influences that would be eventually clear in their war production. As war is the central aspect of the author’s lives and work, it led to the target of exploring new poetic courses and strategies. In addition, Lyon argues that “it can be difficult to avoid a sense of polarization between traditional and modern” (2005: 34), which implies that authors such as Thomas Hardy for instance, made use of traditional themes but wrote in a more original and distinctive way.

Evidently, one of the distinctive points of the poetry of the ‘trench poets’ is the portrayal of the Western Front landscape: the fields of northern France and Belgium, which once they were green and fertile, full of delightful and tiny villages and then had been converted into Hell itself. The young soldiers were continuously under the fierce harassment of the trench warfare, bringing nothing except horror and death. In consequence, these became the main motifs (horror, pity or diluted eroticism), which Mackean argues about,

[...] There is a paradox that lies at the heart of First World War poetry: the world’s first industrial war brutalised the male body on an unprecedented scale, but also fostered the most tender and intimate of human bonds. The ‘human’ element regularly, powerfully drowns the formal qualities of the verse: First World War poetry seems to be one of the last refuges of the inviolate bond between literature and life, [...] as if the free play of signs would undermine its terrible and tragic reality. (2005: 245)

Furthermore, authors usually utilised effectively natural strategies and elements such as pastoral language or visions. As Lyon claims (2005), Francis Ledwidge is one of the examples of the use of these features in poems like ‘A soldier’s grave’ or in Edward Thomas’ ‘As the team’s head-brass flashed out on the turn’. According to her, “the natural imagery can be read [...] as an avoidance of the full horror of war; as an affirmation of national or cultural identity in the context of war; or as an expression of the intensity of loss [...]” (35). Therefore, this leaves clear that poems are so much more than a mere representation of man and war, human and destruction; they also deal with longing and life.

During the first stages of the war, patriotic enthusiasm was essential in war poetry. After a century ruled under the power of Great Britain, the English society as a

whole felt optimistic and that patriotic boost which even celebrated the war. For instance, in the poem 'Peace' by Rupert Brooke, which indeed appears in the first part of *Above the Dreamless Dead*, this tone of celebration is palpable. Additionally, regarding this theme, it is important to mention the representation of the English soldier was linked to the significance of the male youth. As Lyon states, "indeed war is to some extent as a test of youthful masculinity" (2005: 38). Alongside this theme of patriotism, propaganda was also a primordial tool to make the masses believe in a certain view of the war in order to obtain political support, and literature as a result became an instrument for the spreading of those ideas. Consequently, according to Lyon, "the Government called on literary figures to assist with its propaganda campaigns from an early stage in the war, through the work of the Secret War Propaganda Bureau." (2005: 40 - 41). Amongst the authors who took place in this governmental project, we can single out Thomas Hardy's 'Men who march away', Rupert Brooke's 'Peace' or Rudyard Kipling's 'For All We Have And Are.'

Equally important is the motif of protest and pacifism, which was opposed to the one mentioned before. This belief that war was not beneficial at all was started by prominent figures such as playwright George B. Shaw and philosopher Bertrand Russell, who, as Lyon explains, defended "his idea of war as a type of recurring social pathology." (2005: 45). Nowadays, when we think and read about First World War poets we might expect a subordination of this anti-war discourse to the overall canon of this poetry. The acquisition of this concept may come mainly from the fact that Sassoon was one of the landmark authors of trench poetry, and he was firmly opposed to his superiors and criticised the Government for not taking chances to reach peace.

2.1.2. Authors

Amongst the writers which have been mentioned before, the figure of Rupert Brooke is prominent. According to Mackean, "Brooke might be said to have forged the very concept of 'soldier-poet'" (2005: 245). The English writer composed some poems belonging to the theme of patriotism, like 'Peace' and 'The soldier', full of that primitive optimism. As one might expect, the importance of these poets lies in the fact that their lives were in close contact with the conflict, and therefore to death or mutilation. Unfortunately, Brooke died at the beginning of the war on his way to the catastrophic battle of Gallipoli.

Mackean states that this death “passed into myth, crystallising the heroic ideals, fears and pathos of a war-time England” (2005: 245), supposing therefore one of the peculiarities of poets like him. Other distinguished ‘trench poets’ who also met that unlucky fate were Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Charles Sorely, and Irish Francis Edward Ledwidge, who obtained that ‘mythical’ status as well. Apart from them, there is another remarkable author, Siegfried Sassoon, who brilliantly served in the Western Front as well, but was able to survive the war, along with Robert Graves.

One of the singularities of this group of poets is precisely that they are a group, not a movement. Some of the writers did not even know one another and started writing separately, others met in the French battlefield like Sassoon and Graves and others like Brooke were writing from the very beginning of the conflict. Their styles and concerns vary in such a way that even some scholars tend to question their existence, as Longley illustrates for instance, “for Julian Symons, ‘war poets’ as such, do not exist.” (2005: 58). The only thing they had in common was the fact that their poetic production was created directly from the battlefield.

This lack of canon, to put it this way, allowed the writers to tackle with poetry in rather different ways and styles. For instance, Edward Thomas takes into account the role of women, serving as nurses in the war, whereas others like Sassoon and Owen “unfairly ignored or derided” them (Mackean, 2005: 251). Further, Brooke only wrote about his country’s good spirit, whilst Owen, Sassoon or Rosenberg dedicated their writings to criticise the useless war and condemn its horrors. What is more, while Owen was “drawing on Victorian poetic conventions – metre, rhyme, syntax –” (Mackean, 2005: 249), Sassoon looked for a new language in order to express the magnitude of destruction and violence.

2.2. The graphic novel

2.2.1. Definition and aesthetics of the graphic novel

When we think about comics, we might probably come up with the idea of superhero strips such as superman or batman, in theory meant for children. Nevertheless, the graphic novel is much more than that, though it has been traditionally seen as an inferior form of literature. In fact, as Bourelle states, there is still an open discussion about its own

terminology for which we may find different synonyms such as “sequential art, graphic novel, graphic memoir, comic book, comic series, comic strip and so on” (2018: 14). Hence, after taking into account all these concepts, what is specifically a graphic novel? According to Tabachnick, the graphic novel is “an extended comic book that treats nonfictional as well as fictional plots and themes with the depth and subtlety that we have come to expect of traditional novels and extended nonfictional texts.” (2010: 2). It is important to bear in mind this concept in order to clarify the main ideas of this relatively new literary genre of graphic narrative.

Tabachnick illustrates that although the first graphic novel emerged in 1919 with Belgian Frans Masereel’s *Passionate Journey*, the genre took definitely off in the 60s and 70s. One of the unquestionable landmarks of this literature is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, published in 1980. Thereafter, during the 90s this kind of narrative finally became an object of discussion in universities of the United States, which is indeed one of “the three outstanding comics-producing cultures” in the world (Tabachnick, 2010: 3). The other two are the Japanese, which is mainly known for its *Manga*, and the Franco-Belgian, which also possesses a distinctive tradition, the so-called BD or *Bande Dessinée*.

As revealed by Baetens (2001), the status of the graphic narrative is not at an equal position in those countries, since unlike Belgium and France, “in the United States, the genre of the graphic novel, although more clearly defined as with Europe [...], is not yet fully recognized as a serious artistic practice” (7). However, although this genre benefits from decades of canonisation in Belgium and France, the term ‘graphic novel’ is still mostly unknown or simply misunderstood. According to Baetens, these differences are mainly a matter of culture and identity traditions of each places, America and Europe. For instance, he argues that in the United States the use of the graphic novel is becoming more and more a medium to portray a “clear-cut distinction between the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’” (Baetens, 2001: 7). Certainly, this distinction is also palpable in Europe, but with a clear less decisive impact.

Besides, another difference in the perception of the graphic novel is about the issue of word and image. That is, “the American graphic novel considers itself a literary genre: a novel, not made by words, but by images, balloons and captions.” (Baetens, 2001: 8). To put it this way, the American ‘school’ places emphasis on the word ‘novel’, not ‘graphic’, whilst in Europe the situation goes the other way around: the word ‘graphic’ gains importance. The overall sense is what the graphic genre (at least in Europe) is trying to achieve is to discover new capacities and methods, or rather go beyond the plain

process of depiction and create new forms of storytelling. All in all, one of the main purposes of this literary genre is precisely the one which has been mentioned before, overcoming the given customs in literature and create something unique, a blend of painting and narrative resulting directly in a category “whose ambition it is to save the literary heritage in an illiterate world” (Baetens, 2001: 8).

As exposed by Tucker (2010), there are two main discussion lines about comics’ aesthetics, such as “the representation of time through sequential panels and the interaction of word and image” (28). Dealing with the first one, as it happens in narrative, graphic novels present a time linearity through the images or drawings. An example of this can be the ‘chronotope’, which is basically historical or biographical images set in particular locations. Vice (2001) argues that this concept is even in close relation to cinema, an art-form which “itself could be described as chronotopic” (47), in which time and space cannot be separable, as well as from and content. That is, both arts the visual and narrative are cautiously combined forming as a result a whole.

Further, this essayist very wisely uses the example of already mentioned Art Spiegelman’s masterpiece *Maus*, in which “time has thickened simultaneously into the space of Nazi-occupied Poland, and into the panels of the graphic novel” (Vice, 2001: 47). In this graphic novel, the time of memory is a determining feature for which the story of Art’s father and the Holocaust are recreated, which sometimes meet those panels or spaces related to the present time when Vladek, the main character narrates everything to his son Art. As Vice clarifies, it is indeed him who “tries to bring back a sense of linear time to his father’s memories” (2001: 49).

After all this, we can appreciate the idea that graphic novels and comics are not only about superheroes with superpowers, but also stories with more artistic and narrative depth. What this kind of novels are attempting to achieve is to bring forward some real stories from difficult past times and others which are prone to be margined in a country’s history, like the story of Métis leader Louis Riel, adapted by Chester Brown. An interesting and special characteristic of these books is the employ of an art which consists of black and white illustrations with the exception of the covers. As one might expect, their styles are rather different, although some strategies are used in order to acquire that artistic depth. For instance, for the purpose of emphasising some ideas or character’s features and identities, both artists Brown and Spiegelman, among many others, make use of caricature and exaggerations within the drawings. In this sense, King claims,

When one reads a graphic narrative, it is necessary to read beyond the surface of the story. In a graphic narrative, the words and images are inseparable. The graphic elements of a story structure the narrative and, at the same time, tell the story in substantive ways. Note here that the graphic elements are more than just the drawings alone; they also include all aspects of the layout and composition—the way the panels are laid out on the page, the way fonts and font sizes are used, the way spaces are created between the panels, the number of panels per page, and so on. Just as the conventions of prose help to shape the narrative, so too does the graphic organization of the page. (2012: 201 – 202)

As time has passed by, some aspects in the art of the graphic novel have become naturalised, such as the thought and speaking balloons and bubbles mainly or the depiction of sound effects, borrowed directly from traditional comic books. Thereupon, these elements are used in order to guide the reading through the story. Also, it is important to remark that, as stated by King, “the way in which such narratives are framed, and the way subject positions are structured, therefore, allows for ideological, cultural, and historical readings and interpretations of these narratives.” (2012: 202).

2.2.2. *Graphic novel and trauma*

Previously, this essay has dealt with the curious fact that poetry, a theoretically refined genre, was used to convey all the feelings provoked by the Great War in the trench poets. On the other hand, as expressed before, the graphic novel is inaccurately regarded as an inferior literary genre or even only aimed for a young audience. Nonetheless, this genre has proved to be capable of going beyond that, portraying stories about violent and traumatic experiences.

Thus, one may wonder why is the graphic novel used to represent trauma and violence? Essentially, trauma appears after an extremely disturbing event which likely causes both psychological and physical pain on an individual. Therefore, those experiences are expressed in the drawings by either someone who directly suffered them or someone who didn't but is in close contact with the stories. For example, in *Maus*, Spiegelman portrays the cruel situation of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, in which obviously explicit scenes of extreme violence and hatred are depicted.

Nevertheless, according to Reibman (2001), there is a distinction between good and bad literature, the one which presents “violence for plot’s sake and plots for violence’s sake” (23). That is, novels like *Maus* are ‘good literature’ because violence emerges as a result of fascism and anti-Semitism in the Nazi regime.

Also, the genre of graphic novel blends with autobiography, narrating therefore the troubled experiences of an individual. *Maus* is indeed an autobiographical narration amongst many others, such as *Louis Riel*. In this novel, the author brings about the story of the leader of the Métis people, a minority race in Canada, in which themes such as destruction, racism, death and suffering are brought to light. Moreover, as Hein (2001) shows, after the terrible conflicts of both World Wars, some warlike graphic novels appeared as Jacques Tardi’s *It Was the War of the Trenches*, in which the author presents “stories his grandmother told him over and over again about the Great War” (103).

The pictures used in those graphic novels help the reader to understand in a faster way what the story is trying to convey. For instance, in Brown’s *Louis Riel*, as Riel is continuously being let down by the Canadian government, we can appreciate on the drawings a crystal clear atmosphere of tension and exasperation, mainly in the gestures and facial expressions. Moreover, the text in the panels and bubbles may be in capital letters with exclamation marks or in bold, principally when the characters are shouting, but the actual elements which express the effect all traumatic events are having on the characters are the pictures.

In the poem collection *Above the Dreamless Dead*, the situation is certainly similar. The works composed by the trench poets, which obviously addresses the traumatic experiences of soldiers directly from the first line of fire in the Western Front, are adapted into comic strips in a number of drawing styles. These vary a lot from one example to another, yet the addition of semantic references and information by the pictures is palpable in all of them. In the following section of this essay, this is precisely the issue which is going to be analysed, along with the influence of images over the interpretation of the poems.

3. ADAPTATION TO CARTOON STRIPS FORM

3.1. An insight into aesthetics: poets and cartoonists

To begin with, one of the many details of the book we must not overlook is its cover. As shown in fig. 1, the cover of *Above the Dreamless Dead* presents an illustration which symbolically summarises the soul of the book itself. Here, we find the depiction of an army of skeletons in uniform, colourless, surrounding the figure of a soldier with a lifeless gaze, which is the only coloured drawing in the whole book. This image can be seen as the image of each poem's poetic persona, the individual who, encircled by death, is losing the human side of his soul. Of course, although this picture only represents one of the many drawing styles in the book, the reader just after a quick glance can figure out the way trench poetry is going to be treated.

3.1.1. Types of 'poem-comics'

Indeed, one of the richest characteristics of *Above the Dreamless Dead* is the fact that there is not just an editor who compiles everything and creates the content, but there are quite a few cartoonists. In total, twenty-three comic creators contribute to the adaptation of the poems by various authors already mentioned in the first section such as Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg or Siegfried Sassoon. As a result, speaking in terms of aesthetics, the book exhibits a lush appearance since each artist is faithful to their own interpretation of the poem and their drawing styles.

In addition, it is important to remark that the book is judiciously divided in three parts – Call to War, In the Trenches and Aftermath – which clearly alludes to the three stages of the war and the natural parts of any natural story or text: introduction, development and denouement. On the one hand, the first poems present in general a sort of drawings in which the white colour is dominant. As previously mentioned in this essay, during the beginning stages of the war, although reluctant, people were happy to go to war due to their high morale, so the underlying theme of the poems in this section (Call to War) is to express patriotic feelings. Hence, the pictures are portrayed in a rather straightforward and clear style, that is, making use of very defined outlines.

On the other hand, this atmosphere varies a lot in the second section. Here, as the war goes on, drawings become darker and more figurative. For instance, as shown in fig. 2, Owen's 'Greater Love' adapted by cartoonist George Pratt is characterised precisely by its staggering drawings in which forms like human faces, bodies or landscapes are utterly distorted, transmitting at the same time that feeling of dehumanisation and nightmare. It is here where trauma emerges in the shape of a sort of psychotic pictures whose only purpose is to provoke a continuous sensation of instability and uneasiness.

Furthermore, this great variety of artists lead directly to a wide range of each poem's conception, thus we can find several types of poems according to the way the adaptation has been performed. Therefore, I have taken the liberty of sorting these types into three different classes in accordance with the degree of semantic content added to the poems through images.

First of all, in *Above the Dreamless Dead* we can find poems whose images directly describe what the poem is suggesting. As a result, this kind of poems make use of the typical organisation in graphic narratives and comics in regular strips, and each strip is an illustrated representation of every line of the poem. For instance, fig. 3 shows the last three vignettes of Thomas Hardy's 'Channel Firing,' which perfectly exemplifies this type of poem-comic adaptation. By the time the First World War begun, Hardy was an elderly man who wrote his poems from the perspective of rural England, something that is left very clear in these vignettes. The last lines of the poem say: "Again the guns disturbed the hour / Roaring their readiness to avenge / As far inland as Stourton Tower, / And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge." (Duffy, 2014: 13-14). By pointing out these elements within the poem, Hardy's purpose was to somehow legitimate that 'channel firing', a gunnery practice for the protection of the country, England. So, what could be better than those historical heritage places, both real and mythical, to evoke the essence of the country and raise the national pride. Therefore, the images present these ideas as they are, like others in the rest of the poem such as the gothic elements initially suggested.

Moreover, the second type of poem we can encounter in the book is the one whose pictures convey a general sensation or emotion in a specific moment. In other words, this kind of adaptations significantly vary from the so common form of strips displayed in a linear way. In this sense, a poem which could easily exemplify this situation is the famous Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est', in which by means of this Latin utterance, the author mocks the idealisation of servicing for one's country as sweet and

honourable. In this adaptation, the drawings, which are rather dark and disturbing as well as distorted or blurred as shown in fig. 4, occupy the entire part of the page, or half of it, with some smaller images attached of soldiers fixing their anti-gas masks. The images do not represent each line separately but try to convey this general feeling of desolation and suffocation in the trenches after the brutal attack.

Finally, the third type makes reference to those poems whose drawings provide a significant semantic content, meaning, to the fundamental ideas of the poem itself, that is, a story can hide another story. To illustrate this, we can take the poem 'The Question' by Wilfrid Gibson. In this case, fig. 5 presents the poem, which is about a young soldier who longs for his rural village back in England and is worried about one of his cows. Ironically, cartoonist Hannah Berry turns the storyline upside down and depicts a kind of parallel story about a soldier in the Royal Signal corps in charge of war pigeons. Maybe her intentions were to transmit the impossibility to establish connections with the homeland despite working for headquarters messaging in the war.

3.1.2. *Poetic reinterpretation*

As previously exposed, it is evident that the different adaptations bring up a huge semantic content to the poem itself. Obviously, readers do not react in the same way when they are reading any of the poems bare, in their conventional form and when they are doing so in *Above the Dreamless Dead*. In the first situation, we have only one way of interpretation, since it depends only on ourselves, our reading, and our own feelings. However, should we read and adaptation of Duffy's book, the reception of the poem will be completely different. At the very first moment we are in front of one of the 'poem-comics', our perception of the poem gets influenced from the drawings, just after a quick glance.

In some cases, only after this quick overlook of the images, the reader gets to know at least the overall atmosphere of the poem, a general feeling. For instance, making an allusion to the second type of poems in the book, there is an exceptional poem titled 'The Coward' by Rudyard Kipling which is adapted by Stephen Bissette. This is notable because it presents only one picture (although large: it encompasses two pages) for the entire poem. The first thing to come through our eyes is this big and striking illustration of an attack through no man's land, in which soldiers are falling, transmitting as a result a general feeling of death and fear, indeed enhanced at the same time by the drawing style

and its darkish colours. Indeed, all this is can be confirmed after reading the first lines as follows: “I could not look on Death” (Duffy, 2014: 83)

Besides, in this reinterpretation of the poems it is crucial to take into account the already mentioned idea that both text and images are bound together and therefore offer feedback to each other. In this sense, it would be interesting to consider the case of Osbert Sitwell’s ‘The Next War’ (adapted by Simon Gane), located in the third and last part of the book. This piece is a reflection of the war after its end which shows pity, in a sad tone, towards the fallen heroes and the men who returned injured. The cartoonist, very original, makes use of stone memorials of soldiers and families which are indeed real and located in French and English villages, symbols used with the intention of maintaining the memory of the war effort and suffering. This addition of meaning reaches its pinnacle in the end of the poem, when after the lines “The world must be made safe for the young! / And the children / Went...” (Duffy, 2014: 114-115), the cartoonist presents the touching scene of the back of a statue, showing symbolically the years of the beginning and end of the Second World War, for which all the efforts of the Great War soldiers were tore down.

Another distinct use of the poems in *Above the Dreamless Dead* is that of recognising soldiers’ war efforts and their suffering. This can be seen in the poem ‘Repression of War Experience’ by Sassoon, who writes after the conflict about going “mad because of the guns” (Duffy, 2014: 124). Next to this poem, there is a pamphlet which gives light to the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers, which is still a major problem in present day wars. Thus, this is used not only for the recognition of all of those who suffered from it after the Great War, but also to remember and pay an homage to soldiers who returned home after their service but did not make to overcome their trauma: “With respect for the words of the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who have found the courage to bear witness” (Duffy, 2014: 125).

3.2. A closer look into Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump'

In order to analyse this outstanding work a little deeper, I chose Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' due to his highly dramatic content and the way artists Pat Mills and David Hitchcock deal with this issue.

As the rest of the trench poets, Rosenberg presents a particular style, and as argued by Jon Silkin in the introduction of *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, "war poets owe too much to the early politics and literature of Wordsworth and Coleridge." (1996: 17). In spite of being initially influenced by romantic authors, due mainly to his intellectual formation, Rosenberg stood as an ambitious man. In his youth, he received some formation in painting, something that would try to apply later in his poetic production. According to Geoffrey Hill, "his ambition was to release his own voice from the constraints of the conventionally approved voices of poetry." (1999: 224). That is, amongst the literary canons given during his time, Rosenberg wanted to get rid of its limits and try to reach a canon with intrinsic value.

Rosenberg's writing style can be summarised just in one word: expression. The intense character of his words makes the poem turn into a very energetic and powerful source of expression about the feelings and ideas of the war. In this sense, Hill quotes some words by Sassoon on Rosenberg as a writer who "modelled words with fierce energy and aspiration" (1999: 218). On the whole, what he tried to convey in the poems was to transmit what he, as a soldier, felt from the inside, his soul right after his daily routines at the Western Front's trenches. Hill argues that Rosenberg's technique,

Proves more than equal to the forces of distraction – a word by which I mean to invoke: agitated incertitude, not knowing what to do for the best; also chronic absent-mindedness [...], a form of forgetfulness which is not actually a sign of weakness but of strength – the immense strength of other priorities, such as working on massive and complex poems in your head amid the manifold terrors and routine hard labour of life in the trenches. (Hill, 1999: 216)

The poem 'Dead Man's Dump' is the perfect example to give light to these characteristics. As shown before, Rosenberg's poems present curious scenes of his routines at the battlefield, such as the encounter with a rat in 'Bread of Day in the Trenches', or in 'The Immortals' in which he talks about lice (both included in *Above the Dreamless Dead*).

‘Dead Man’s Dump’ is quite larger than these other two, where he presents the daily task of driving a limber (a wooden carriage) full of spikes which are to be deployed in the battlefield. Rosenberg thinks about the huge mass of corpses which are thrown into a massive dump through which they have to pass on the ‘limber.’ In addition, there is another underlying topic of the Great War poetry between these lines: aversion towards commanders and generals. This topic is the one which gains importance in the adaptation through Hitchcock’s drawings.

Overall, we can easily differentiate two kind of pictures which belong to two storylines that seem melted into another. These drawings are less blurry and more precise than other examples in the book, but the allegorical intentions are still present. On the one hand, there is this storyline about the limber, showing this carriage full of spikes cruising the battlefield over the poem’s title. Behind, we can see the second side of the poem, that is, the story of a general who instead of living like a rat on the trenches, is far from danger in a country-house, an extra addition of the cartoonist to the theme of ‘aversion towards generals’ which provide a new rich semantic content. This part about the general becomes almost primary in the lines “Who hurled them out? Who hurled?”, as the cartoonist shows this general having dinner in tranquillity.

Next, the images go back to the battlefield as the poem’s lines evoke the escaping soul of a dead soldier, as shown in fig. 6. These dark images might remind us of a sort of gothic imagery, everything set in an evil and nocturnal atmosphere, with macabre images of dead men apparitions. Moreover, there is in one vignette a huge and dark skull projected in the black sky, emphasising as a result the theme of death.

After this, the images alluding to both ‘storylines’ keeps alternating continuously like the episode of the stretchers and the familiar meeting in the general’s mansion. Thereafter, while the poem focuses on describing how the dead soldiers’ faces are transforming while lying on the grey grass and clay, the cartoonist brings about a dream alike scene. The general falls asleep and he ‘magically’ appears in the middle of this dump full of corpses, which is depicted in the adaptation covered in white lines of bad odour. At this point, the drawings offer another interpretation, when a wounded soldier raises his hand to the general in an attempt of being saved. Nevertheless, the lines of the poem suggest this soldier is trying to reach the carriage: “And the choked soul stretched weak hands / to reach the living word the far wheels said.”

Finally, in the last scene we can oversee after a quick glance that faces are showing painful expressions, living a clue of the poem’s dénouement. We find the

carriage, while crossing the enormous dump of dead bodies, unfortunately runs over the face of this dying man. The general feeling of both images and text is that there is a sort of special connection between the general and the soldier, a rather moving moment. In words of the cartoonist himself, after reading the poem “It was so moving I almost felt I was there on the battlefield, knee deep in the Dead Man’s Dump.” This extraordinary atmosphere also leaves unanswered questions such as what if they are relatives, father and son? or does the general become aware of the atrocious situation the young men are experiencing on the trenches?

Anyway, on the whole the reader becomes aware of this issue of inefficient commanding by high superiors during the Great War. Like many poems by Sassoon, here Isaac Rosenberg charges against British generals who allegedly live away from any danger and the demoralised troops, who felt as if they had been abandoned to their own fate, to a most certain death. The cartoonist, David Hitchcock, brings this apparently underlying theme to the front, giving it a more important status within the poem through the mere use of images. In his own words, he explains “the inspiration for the adaptation was a film that criticised generals of World War I: *Oh, What a lovely War!*”

4. ABOVE THE DREAMLESS DEAD AS A GRAPHIC NOVEL

After having reached this point, we have only one question in need of an answer: could *Above the Dreamless Dead* be considered a graphic narrative? Previously in this essay some examples have been mentioned, such as Spiegelman's *Maus* or Brown's *Louis Riel*, examples of a pure narrative style. But what happens when cartoons and poems are combined?

One of the main issues when writing and interpreting a book like this is the fact that poetry is being adapted into comic strips, and this is considered to be a narrative genre. Hence, there we may find a linear story emerged from an author's mind or based in real events. In this sense, in the book's introduction, Duffy argues for the creation of content of both the poets and the cartoonists of this book,

The trench poets were creating literature; they were artists creating worlds filled with characters and stories. Cartoonists do much the same thing, even if the tools are different. In this way, I think the adapters in this book-some of the best comics creators working in Europe and North America-are well-suited for the task of bringing these poems to new readers. (Duffy, 2014: 6)

Therefore, we get the idea that not only the poets but also the cartoonists with their art contribute to the construction of a work of such characteristics. Here it is important to remark the notion that in a graphic narrative, the words and images are inseparable, as previously stated in the second chapter of this essay about the graphic novel. The graphic elements organise the structure of the story and simultaneously offer a different telling of the story, just as we have seen in the analysis of some of the poems in *Above the Dreamless Dead*.

Having said this, it is also crucial to bear in mind what the clash of poetry and narrative result in this book. On the one hand, narrative implies having a story, with a plot, several characters, an *agon* and an ending, and so on. As a matter of fact, this book is cleverly divided in three parts, 'The call to war', 'In the trenches' and 'Aftermath', making reference to the introduction, the conflict and the *dénouement* and the war repercussions. Moreover, it could be considered the existence of a main character, the soldier-poet who is struggling in the trenches under the shell hail. On the other hand, unlike narrative, poetry is not based on time, and usually there is only one character or

poetic persona. Thus, linearity is not present in the poems, since they are timeless. Poetry is about a precise moment and the feelings that it produces, so, although a poem occupies written space (shorter or longer), its essence is not prolonged in time, becoming as a result into a kind of ethereal literature.

In consequence, it is indeed a challenge to perform a mixture of both poetry and the graphic narrative. First of all, in many poems the organisation of the strips leads the composition to acquire a linear scheme, which is also a semantic element in itself, as argued before in the second chapter; they add a significant amount of meaning. Sometimes, the composition of the graphic elements is equal or more important than the proper narration, and as King states, “the same size gutter can represent any amount of time (or distance)—the reader must make the connections across the gutter to determine how much time has passed and what has occurred during that period of time” (2012: 202).

After all this, we can come to the realisation that in the graphic narrative, linearity is somehow disrupted, that is, “comics and graphic narratives can be read forwards and backwards” (King, 2012: 203). For instance, in ‘Repression of War Experienced’ by Sassoon and adapted by James Lloyd, we find images of the poet in retirement while crying about the painful effects of the war on himself, but at the same time there are other drawings inserted in between as flashbacks, reminiscences of the war in no apparent order. The reader can focus on these different parts of the poem, but the tendency is to read them at the same time.

All in all, could we affirm that *Above the Dreamless Dead* is a graphic novel? Perhaps this declaration is quite optimistic because we cannot find different main characters or villains as well as a clear storyline as a whole. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that the book offers an updated vision of the poems giving them a feeling of narrative and even filmic style which makes the reader be captivated by both the poem lines and the drawings simultaneously, throwing in as a result considerable emotive force.

5. CONCLUSION

The words by Virginia Woolf quoted at the beginning of this essay are not of random choice since they summarise the overall opinion the trench poets had about war after some years of bloody conflict: senseless and inhuman. This, amidst other peculiarities of Great War poetry was what Chris Duffy wanted to reflect in *Above the Dreamless Dead*, in which he compiles the poems by the most significant poets of the 1914-1918 war, both soldiers and non-combatants.

In this essay, we have dealt with the main issues concerning aesthetics both in First World War poetry and the graphic novel in the context of historical narratives. War poetry of that era is famous and characterised for durability in time, and also in terms of popularity, because as argued by Lyon and Campbell, creates a curious relationship between history, literature, and commemoration. Moreover, the most recognised authors are the trench poets, because they reflected their feelings about the war directly from the battlefields in France, something which is still nowadays rather striking. Also, one of their peculiarities is that they were not a literary group but are usually get together in anthologies because of the common setting, the trenches.

The other matter concerning the book in question is the graphic novel, which at first sight is an unusual narrative genre to present stories about war and death. This is because comics are wrongly linked to an informal context and to the literature aimed to the young audience. However, the graphic novel curiously deals in a very effective way with more serious topics related with history and wars, such as the Holocaust and other traumatic events in some countries. In these novels, it is interesting to remark that images tend to acquire even more importance than the narration itself, since the cartoonist can play with visual symbology and toss in additional content and meaning.

One of the main roles of *Above the Dreamless Dead* is to bring forth again the best poetry about the First World War but adapted into a graphic novel form with the contribution of several cartoonists and artists. All this not only does offer a renewed vision of the poems, but also makes this kind of literature more appealing for the young or new readers, regardless the age. Each cartoonist takes their freedom when adapting a poem since they have performed an interpretation. Therefore, the reader finally finds the poems with their drawings and has to make an extra effort to comprehend both the poem and the way it is interpreted by the artist; as a result, we can ironically say the reader's conclusions are the interpretation of an interpretation.

The most important question of this essay is whether *Above the Dreamless Dead* could be considered a graphic novel or not. As clearly explained above, comics are considered a narrative literary form and in consequence, it creates a paradox since the texts which are adapted are poems (with the exception of a couple of parts which are excerpts of actual narratives). As readers, we might be constantly looking for a kind of linearity and connections between the poems, which are indeed grouped in three sections according to their setting: before, during or after the war. This helps to create the feeling of time linearity, with a beginning (the preparation and marching to the war) and an ending (perceptions about the consequences of the war), something which in formal terms collide with the poems, because they are conceived as timeless.

To sum up, this book is the perfect resource to enter the world of history through poems of the Great War, and the one of the graphic medium. In this sense, it would be an appealing method to introduce in the classroom historical traumas such as this cruel war and the effect it had inside the soldiers, all of it through the literary genre of poetry, which is not that popular nowadays, compared to the novel.

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7. APPENDIX

Figure 1: Cover of *Above the Dreamless Dead*

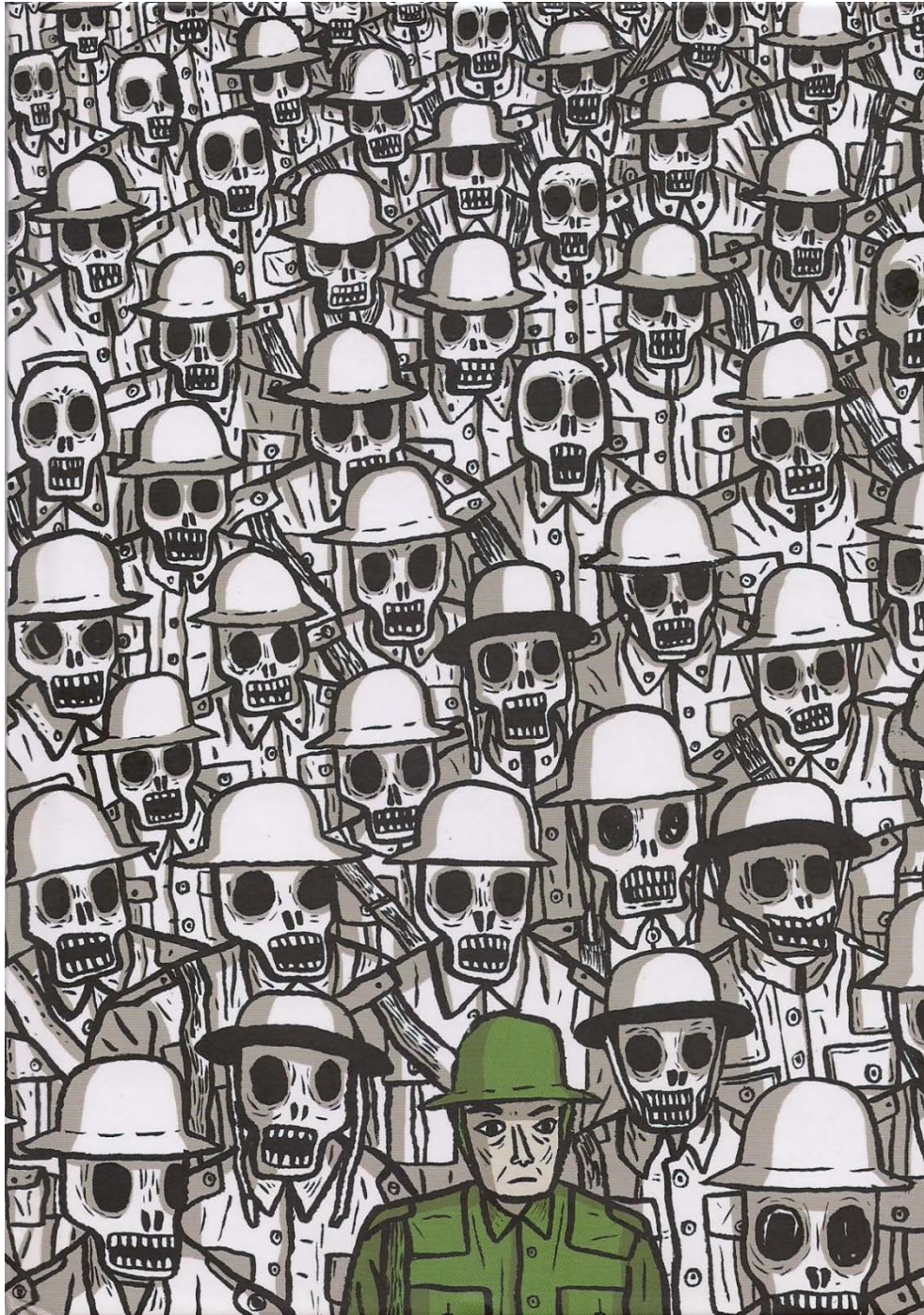


Figure 2: Wilfred Owen's 'Greater Love'

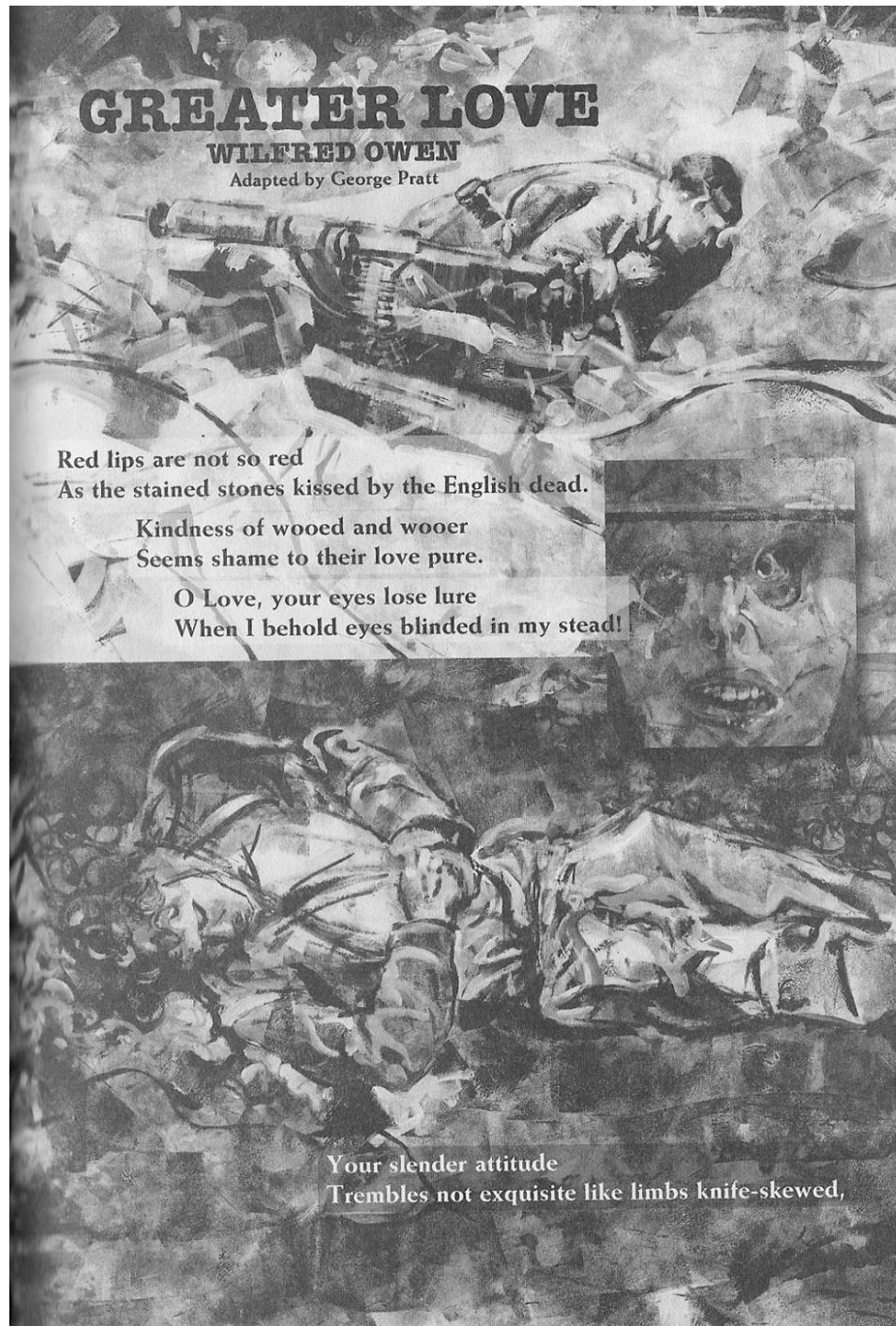


Figure 3: Thomas Hardy's 'Channel Firing'

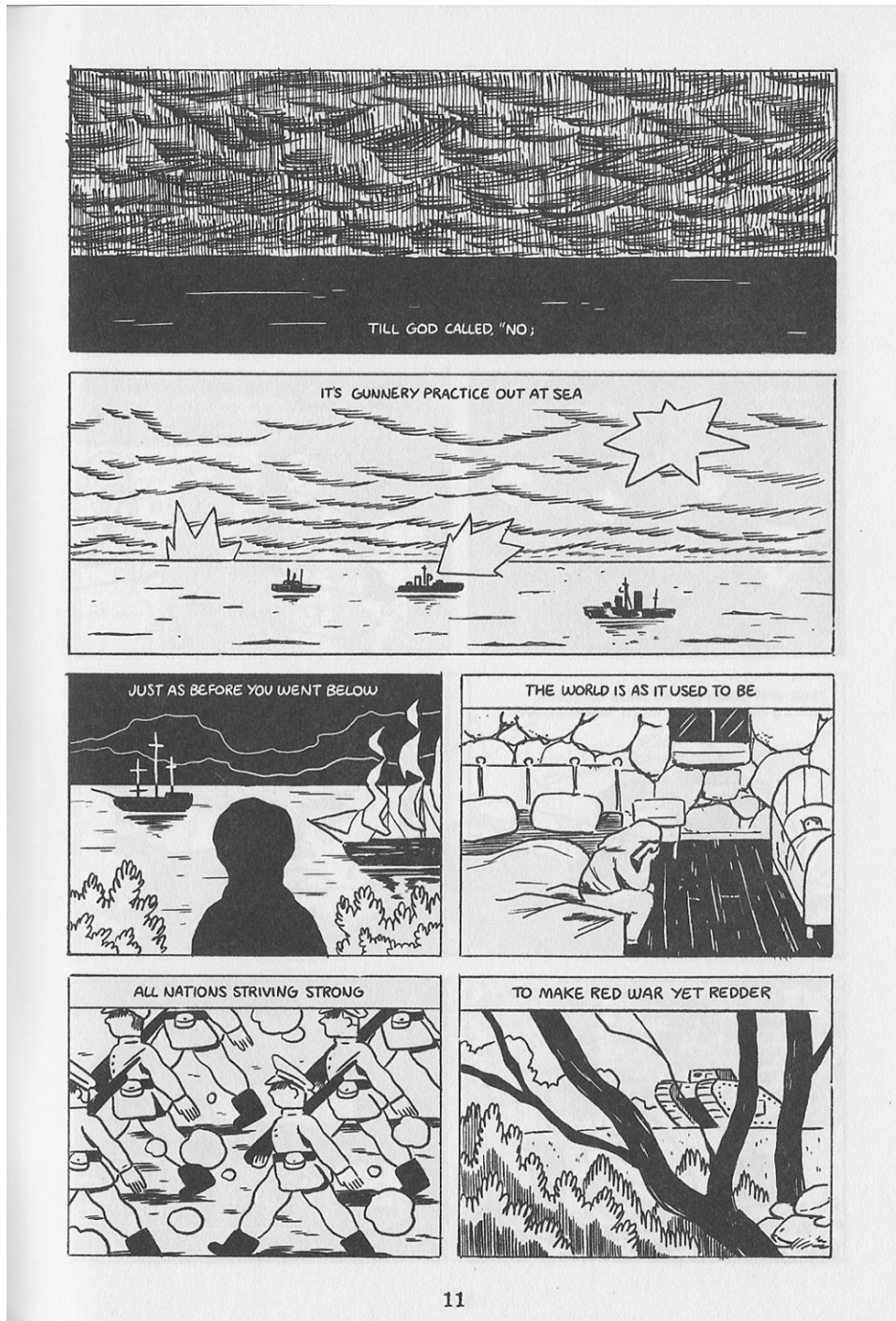
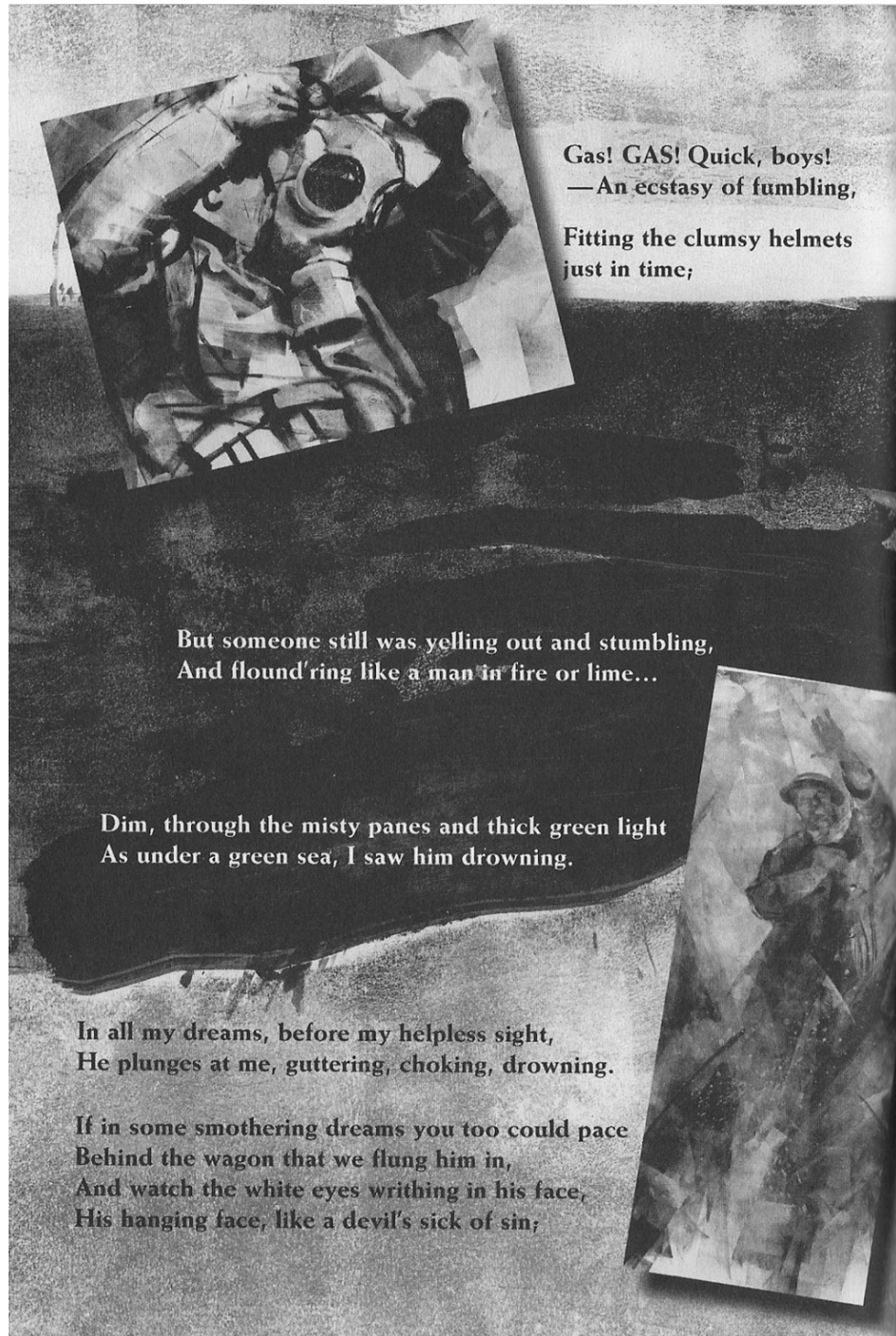


Figure 4: Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'



Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!
—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets
just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

Figure 5: Wilfred W. Gibson's 'The Question'

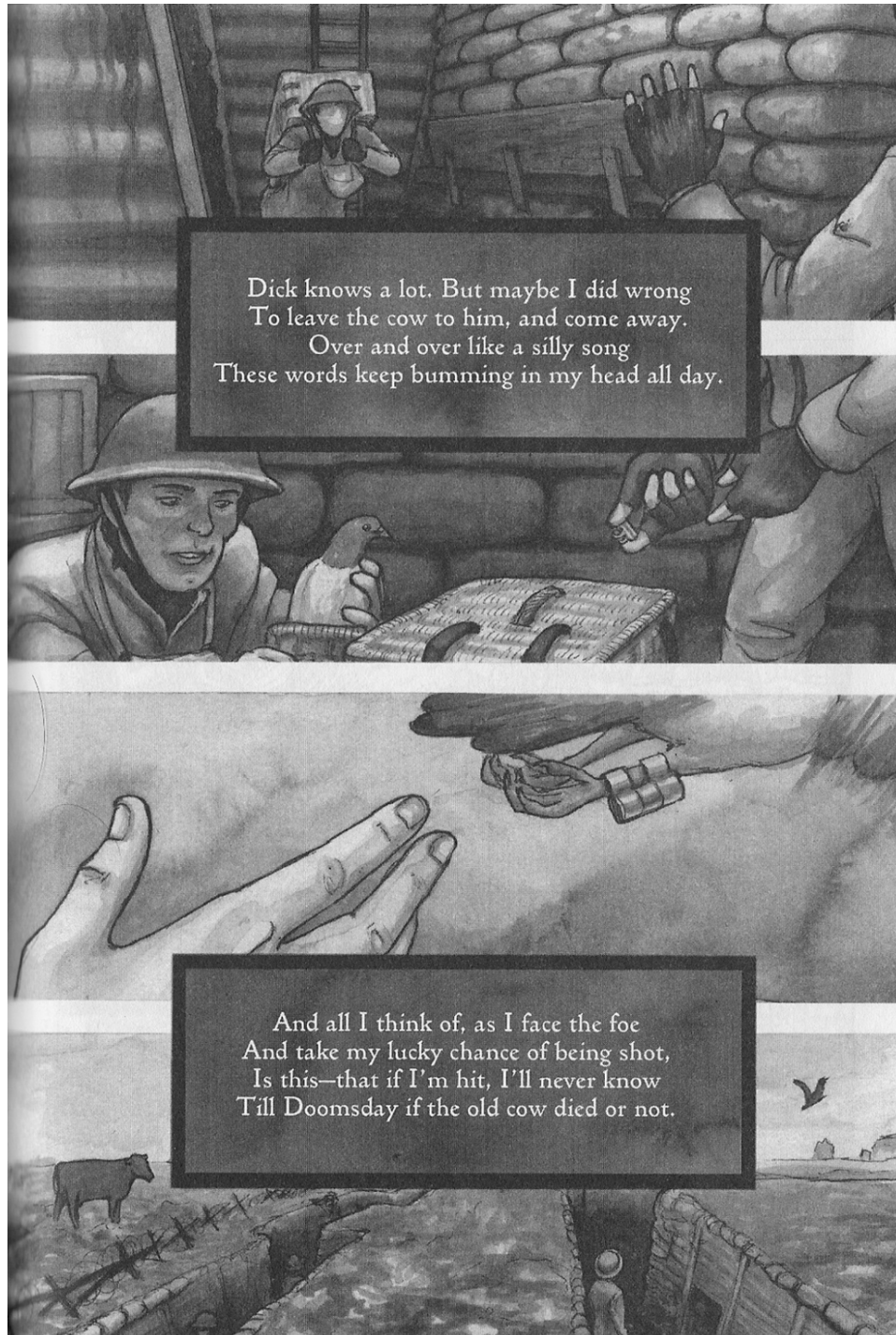


Figure 6: Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump'

